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ABSTRACT

Research on the language development of children in immersion programs has uncovered a certain amount of data. Immersion students have less well developed productive skills than their francophone peers and passive receptive skills which approach those of francophones. Error analysis studies have found that immersion students reach a plateau in their language usage and that some errors are systematically repeated by individuals and by different learners in different settings. Interlanguage research has called attention to the "fossilization" phenomenon and suggested that feedback is a key factor. In immersion programs, once students acquire enough language for communication, the teacher may not correct language errors, thus providing positive feedback for both language and answer. In line with the pidginization hypothesis, it has been noted that immersion students develop a simplified language system which allows them to communicate with teacher and friends. Gradually, they begin to model their speech more on their classmates' speech than on their teacher's. According to the research implications, there will be little development as long as the acquired language meets communication needs. To remedy the situation, classroom strategies might be modified to include emphasis on correct linguistic forms, and steps might be taken to increase students' exposure to the target language. (AMH)

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THE RELEVANCE OF INTERLANGUAGE AND PIDGINIZATION TO FRENCH IMMERSION SCHOOLING

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THE RELEVANCE OF INTERLANGUAGE AND PIDGINIZATION TO FRENCH IMMERSION SCHOOLING

At the present time there is anecdotal evidence and a certain amount of 'hard' data indicating that the language development of children in immersion programs slows down quite noticeably once they have attained a more or less adequate level of communicative competence. Although some researchers may not agree that this phenomena has been documented, it is never-the-less predictable from both interlanguage theory and pidginization theory. The present paper will first provide support for the existence of a plateau in immersion students' language development, and then discuss the data in terms of the interlanguage and pidginization hypotheses.

The initial goal of French immersion programs was the enhancement of the students' skills in French without the development of a deficit in either their English language skills or their overall academic progress. The earliest research sought to compare students from the immersion programs with their non-immersion peers (Stern, 1978). Almost immediately it was seen that they could not be compared in terms of French language skills because the immersion students were so far beyond their non-immersion peers. At the same time it seemed that these students showed no deficit, or only a fairly small temporary deficiency in their English language skills and other scholastic development (Lambert, 1974, Swain, 1974).

Having learned that students in immersion programs far exceed the original expectations, research began to address a new set of concerns. The emphasis shifted to comparisons of students in different types of immersion programs with each other, and with youngsters whose native language was French (Swain, 1974). It was hoped that such an approach would lead to an optimum immersion program

and demonstrate the relative efficacy of the various options available. We stopped asking whether or not the French immersion programs work. We know they work quite well. The new questions became "How much is reasonable to expect from these programs?" and "What steps can we take to further improve the results we are getting?" (Stern 1978, Swain 1975).

In order to answer these questions, we must first get a firm idea not only of what the immersion students are achieving, but also of what they are failing to achieve. To this end we can gain a great deal by looking at comparisons of the immersion students with their francophone age peers. At a fairly gross level of inspection, we know that immersion students are doing well even in comparison with their francophone peers. Swain (1976) indicates that by the end of grade 3 or 4 the early immersion students can read, write, speak and understand French. Their skills, compared with those of native speakers, place them around the thirtieth percentile on standardized tests. Bruck et al.(1974) tell us that they can communicate effectively with francophone age peers. Other authors have corroborated these findings while adding new detail. Andrew et al. (1980) found that immersion students in Ottawa consistently score at or above the stanine 4 level on the Test de rendement en français from grade 3 onward. Lambert (1974) tells us that by the end of grade 6, students in the St. Lambert project are communicating orally at the same level as the French speaking controls, and in writing show no more errors or grammar or structure than the controls, although the content produced by the immersion students is judged to be "less rich". Genesee and Chaplin (1975) find that the immersion students lag in oral production skills but are comparable to the French controls in the passive receptive skills such as reading and aural comprehension. Findings by Adiv (1980), Stern (1978),

Spilka (1976), and Harley and Swain (1978) all confirm this dichotomy in performance between active productive skills which are less well developed and the passive receptive skills, which approach those of francophones.

Other authors using the vehicle of error analysis (Corder, 1967, Abbott, 1980) have been able to examine the types of production errors and stylistic modifications made by the immersion students in greater detail. Some of these findings are summarized in Table 1.

It can be seen from Table 1 that the immersion students' use of French is at times structurally unlike either standard French or standard English directly translated into French. The sentences they produce tend to be shorter, simpler, less redundant, and less varied in terms of the use of several different ways of saying the same thing. Immersion students, even with as little as one to two years in program have reached a level of French language development which is generally adequate for communication. Their use of the language is not elegant, but they are able to make themselves understood by their teachers and fellow students, and to perhaps a more limited extent with francophones. (See Genesee and Chaplain, 1975 or Adiv and Morcos 1979, regarding performance of students in two-year late entry immersion in the Montreal area.

The active vocabularies of immersion students are relatively limited, and certain classes of words remain essentially unused.

Certain types of errors are found repeatedly across the populations studied. Not only are some errors systematically repeated by individual students, they are also systematically repeated by different learners in different settings.

Table 1

Errors and Strategies Noted in the Written and Oral Production of French Immersion Students

Error/Strategy	Authors Reporting
NOUNS	
Gender (noun or article)	Harley (1979) Spilka (1976), Swain (1975a)
Noun/article number agreement	Swain (1975a)
PRONOUNS	
Form or gender	Adiv (1980), Buteau and Gougeon (1974) Mougeon and Belanger (in Harley, 1979) Selinker et al. (1975) Spilka (1976) Swain (1975a)
Pronoun placement	Adiv (1980, Selinker et al. (1975)
Pronoun omission	Adiv (1980), Spilka (1976), Swain (1975a)
ADJECTIVES	
Limited use	Adiv (1980), Buteau and Gougeon (1974), Swain (1975a)
Non-agreement of number	Swain (1975)
PREPOSITIONS	
Substitution, intrusion and omission	Adiv (1980) Buteau and Gougeon (1974) Spilka (1976), Swain (1975)
VERBS	
Substitution	Adiv (1980), Harley and Swain (1978) Selinker et al. (1975)
Incorrect auxiliary	Adiv (1980), Hamayan and Tucker (1979) Harley and Swain (1978), Spilka (1976) Swain (1975a)
Incorrect inflection	Adiv (1980), Hamayan and Tucker (1979) Harley and Swain (1978), Spilka (1976) Swain (1975, 1975a)
STRATEGIES	
Small, repeated vocabulary	Buteau and Gougeon (1974, Lambert (1974) Swain (1975)
Simplified sentence structures or avoidance of complex structure	Adiv (1980), Hamayan and Tucker (1979), Lambert (1974), Selinker et al. (1975) Spilka (1976), Swain (1975, 1975a), Taylor (1978)

One more point should be expressed here: although the students' passive language ability continues to keep pace more or less with that of their francophone peers, it appears that their productive language ability essentially does not continue to grow beyond a certain point (Adiv, 1980). Students tend to persist in making certain types of errors in spite of continuing linguistic input.

In addition to the sort of specific data shown in table 1, there is anecdotal information that describes the students' linguistic development in a more holistic way. People working in immersion settings talk about a "plateau effect" in which students' progress seems to level off after a few years in the program. Others note that the minimum necessary for communication becomes the maximum achieved in the classroom (Canale, personal communication). One teacher we know put it well: "They start out sounding like little francophones and then somewhere around grade four they start sounding like little anglos speaking French." These impressions along with the more formal data indicate that there seems to be a point at which the students' interlanguage development either stops or slows significantly. To gain a better understanding of possible mechanisms involved in this plateau effect it may be instructive to turn our attention to some of the literature on interlanguage and pidginization.

The "Interlanguage Hypothesis" developed by Selinker (1972) and others (Selinker, Swain and Dumas, 1975; Vigil and Oller, 1976; Selinker and Lamendella, 1978) and a very similar theory of "Approximative Language Systems" (Nesmer, 1971; Sampson, 1978; John, 1980) have been developed to account for the processes by which second languages are learned or acquired in naturalistic settings. These authors are concerned with the learners' apparent stepwise development of second language ability, and the commonly observed phenomenon

of 'fossilization' in which a learner's language stops developing with respect to certain items or rules. This phenomenon of fossilization can also be seen in the recurrence of supposedly eradicated errors which re-emerge under certain conditions. Fossilization is of particular interest to the present discussion because in its various forms it seems to be very similar to the sort of stabilization or plateau that occurs with immersion students (Selinker, Swain and Dumas, 1975).

In attempting to explain a mechanism by which fossilization might occur, Vigil and Oller (1976) suggest that reinforcement or feedback is the key factor involved. These authors distinguish between affective and cognitive feedback. The expectation of negative cognitive feedback keeps the learner's language in a state of flux and the expectation of positive cognitive feedback leads to stabilization. (The force of this cognitive feedback is reduced if affective feedback is not predominantly positive and as expected.) Selinker and Lamendella (1978) object to the reinforcement model as an explanation of fossilization or stabilization, but the objection is weak and seems to be based on a confusion between extrinsic and explicit. Their argument is that the interactive needs of the learner determine the lower bound on fossilization, but I would contend that not having one's interactive needs met is indeed implicit negative cognitive reinforcement. By the same logic, having one's interactive needs met would provide implicit and possibly explicit positive cognitive reinforcement, which would lead to the stabilization that Vigil and Oller describe.

The relevance of all this to the immersion classroom has to do with the communicative competence achieved by the students. Once they are able to make themselves understood effectively, the reinforcement situation becomes

confused. If the teacher asks a question and a student gives a correct but ungrammatical answer, the teacher's tendency is to ignore the language error rather than interrupt the flow of conversation and instruction. By accepting the student's answer without simultaneously correcting the language use, the teacher is giving positive cognitive feedback for both the answer and the language, and both will tend to be retained in the student's repertoire (cf. Swain, 1974), even though the language use isn't intentionally reinforced. Thus the application of reinforcement theory to the interlanguage model would predict the tapering off of language development in the classroom once the students have achieved a measure of fluency.

The pidginization hypothesis as developed by Schumann (1974, 1978a, 1978b) and others (Bickerton, 1977; Andersen, 1979) like the interlanguage hypothesis, is principally concerned with the acquisition of languages in naturalistic settings. It is important at the outset that pidginization be viewed as a process and not be confused with pidgin languages which are a product of this process. Pidginization is the learner's reduction and simplification of a target language due to cognitive constraints. The initial input to this process is generally the normal native target language, but learners are unable to take in all of the input at once. In order to communicate these learners extract those elements of language which are most critical for their communicative needs. Under favorable conditions, this reduced form of language becomes increasingly complex as the learner is more able to process the available linguistic input. Under conditions where the linguistic input is more limited, however, the learner will tend to persist in the use of a reduced and simplified form of the language. Essentially the more and less favorable conditions for language acquisition correspond to greater and lesser

availability of exposure to the target language (TL). Andersen (1979) makes this position especially relevant to the immersion classroom when he states, "In addition, if the incipient pidgin speakers outnumber the speakers of the TL, the pidgin speakers are eventually exposed more to each others' pidginized interlanguage than to the full blown TL" (cf. Swain, 1974). On the basis of limited contact, the pidginization hypothesis would also predict limited language development.

Some obvious parallels exist between these theoretical notions about pidgins and interlanguages and what is actually found in the French immersion classroom situation. The essence of the immersion setting is a contact situation between two language groups, one represented by the students and the other represented by the teacher. Through this contact the students gradually develop a simplified language sustem which allows them to communicate with the teacher and each other (Szamosi, et al. 1979). The students make systematic errors (as well as random errors) similar to those made by persons acquiring a first or second language in a fully naturalistic way. (Dulay & Burt 1974, 1974a; Ervin-Tripp 1974; Lightbrown, 1977).

In the classroom, when students first enter the immersion program, the only normative model of the L2 is the teacher's speech. In the initial phases of learning, the teacher is obviously the only one who has a fluent and apparently correct command of the L2. Hence the teacher's speech is the only model at which the students have to aim. Over time, as individual students approach fluency, they begin to model their speech on what they hear from each other. This corresponds to the point at which the "incipient pidgin speakers outnumber the speakers of the full blown TL". Even assuming that the teachers speak perfect L2, their power as normative models greatly diminishes as the number of relatively fluent classmates increases. This stage in the students'

language development corresponds to the conditions Schumann (1978a) establishes for the development of a true pidgin. The model of standard usage of the target language is still available, but its relative availability is substantially reduced. In addition, although the students are in fact all members of the same language community, in the classroom it is as though they are members of different language communities who are able to communicate with each other through the vehicle of the classroom's language. Once the stage is reached when most or all of the students in a class have attained communicative or discourse fluency, the normative model is the speech more or less common to the group, and not the relatively standard L2 spoken by the teacher.

According to Schumann's (1974) model, there will be little development within the pidgin language, as long as it meets the speaker's communication needs, and so long as those needs are not extended into areas of expression and social status marking.

A determiniation of the minimum level of fluency necessary for adequate classroom communication could well indicate the point of diminishing returns for the immersion treatment. One might even be able to predict the point at which a learning plateau will occur for any given group based on the learners' collective level of fluency.

Pedagogical Implications

Given that a plateau in the immersion students' language acquisition is predictable in theory and observable in practice, we face the question of what steps if any can be taken to promote a fuller level of linguistic development in the second language. The material presented here points in two distinct directions.

One approach suggested from the interlanguage material would be to somehow modify the classroom reinforcement strategies in a way that puts greater

emphasis on the use of correct linguistic forms. This might, for example, be done by noting the correctness or incorrectness of both the content and the form, e.g. "That's right, Jean, but can you think of a better way to say it?". The principal difficulties with this type of approach are that it takes more time and that it tends to distract from a desirable flow of instruction. Unfortunately, unless some such deliberate strategy is used students will be rewarded for language performance that is below what we want them to achieve.

The second approach suggested by the pidginization model entails taking steps to increase the students' exposure to the target language. A variety of mechanisms might be used to this end, for example, in class use of television programming in the target language, addition of teaching assistants who do not speak the children's native language, combining students from both language groups in the same classes, providing students with opportunities for extended bilingual exchanges. Each of these strategies has its own particular costs and drawbacks, but unless steps such as these are taken, it is doubtful if we can expect substantially better second language acquisition than our students now achieve.

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